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ABSTRACT

American colleges and universities are losing more and more students between their freshman and sophomore years. This problem is even more pronounced among Black and/or open-admissions institutions. This study investigates the relationship between student academic performance and academic advisement at the collegiate level. The sample consists of the academic records of 110 Black American, first-year students at a predominantly Black, urban, public university located in the southern United States. The sample was divided into two groups: (1) students (N=62) who either successfully completed basic/remedial course work or who were exempted due to test (ACT/SAT) scores; and (2) students (N=48) who were required to take basic/remedial course work but either did not successfully pass or were ill-advised to bypass the courses. When measuring and comparing the subjects' between-group performance in a course deemed by college authorities as requiring 12th-grade reading, writing, and comprehension skills, the results revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups. The findings support the idea that advising procedures in colleges and universities can have a profound effect on the subsequent academic performance levels of students. Two bar graphs illustrate the statistical conclusions. Contains 19 references. (RJM)

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The Relationship Between Black Student Level of Academic Success and Academic Advisement: A Case Study.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between student academic performance and academic advisement at the collegiate level. The convenience sample consist of the academic records of 110 Black American, first-year college students. The setting is a predominantly Black public university located in a large city within the southern region of the United States. The sample was divided into two groups. Group A (n=62) consists of those students who either successfully completed basic/remedial coursework or who were exempted due to test (ACT/SAT) scores. Students who were required to take basic/remedial coursework but either did not successfully pass or were ill-advised to bypass the courses were included in Group B (n=48). The classroom mean(x), between-group performance of the sample in a course deemed by college authorities as requiring 12th grade reading, writing and comprehension skills were measured and compared. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p < .05$). The results seem to support the idea that advising procedures in colleges and universities can have a profound effect on the subsequent academic performance levels of students.

A growing number of educational researchers and policy experts in higher education have become aware of a growing retention problem (Lowenstein & Grites, 1993; Orbach, 1988). In fact, recent trends strongly suggest that colleges and universities are experiencing their greatest loss of students in the first year. This fact is illustrated in reports generated by data gathered annually by the American College Testing Program (Noel & Levitz, 1983) and "Vital Signs" published by the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (1993/1994, 1994). These reports show that, nationally, the freshman-to-sophomore attrition or drop out rate is approximately 32%. Even higher is the freshman-to-sophomore attrition rate (approximately 41%) for open-admissions institutions, or those schools whose students generally score 15 or less on the ACT. On average, these rates are even higher for Black colleges and universities and are projected to increase across all types of higher educational institutions (Noel & Levitz, 1983; Vital Signs, 1993/1994, 1994).

American colleges and universities are, therefore, faced with a growing problem where they are losing students before their second year. Again, this problem

is even more pronounced among Black and/or open-admissions institutions. This does not bode well for a nation whose workforce needs to be increasingly better educated and skilled in order to successfully compete in what is now a global marketplace. The existing body of literature, however, suggest that a solution is attainable. What this study seeks to show, in a selected case, is that if the function of academic advising is appropriately performed, it can be the key element for improving student academic success and, as a result, retention.

Literature Review

Investigating the literature in regards to the declining rates of retention and academic success, revealed several common themes. For instance, it seemed to be generally recognized that the attrition and low academic success rates had been increasing significantly in recent years (Blanc, DeBuhr, & Martin, 1983; Carroll, 1988; Johnson, 1990). Yet, the mechanisms thought, at least theoretically, to reduce such negative indicators, namely generalized counseling and advising, do not generally seem to be successful, especially in Black and open-admissions institutions.

By investigating further, other researchers (Andrews, Andrews, Long, & Henton, 1987; Blanc et al, 1983; Kapraun, 1992; Orbach, 1988; Stickle, 1982) discovered that the "concept" of advising was not the problem, but rather the manner in which it was implemented and maintained. These researchers learned that the advisory functions within most institutions of higher education were not being properly operated in regards to addressing the needs of their at-risk populations. By "at-risk", these investigators are referring to those students who, by virtue of low ACT scores and/or underdeveloped basic skills, usually accompanied by low morale, are likely to drop or academically fail.

Stickle (1982) and others (Andrews et al, 1987; Blanc et al, 1983; Hanson & Raney, 1993; Kapraun, 1992; Lowenstein & Grites, 1993; Orbach, 1988), intensively investigating faculty advisement roles, asked questions as to how primary advising functions were being met. The ongoing results are leading these investigators to conclude that most college personnel engaged in academic advising, especially those dedicated to other duties outside of advising (i.e. teaching, administration, etc.)

are improperly trained or not trained at all. The researchers have found that when ill-trained advisors, who may have a general perception of academic advising as a burden or an addition to their primary duties, are used in this area, the results are often misadvised, and subsequently, unsatisfied and academically failing students.

This finding is particularly important when the bulk of the literature concerning the area of academic advising concludes that the academic advising function is necessary for securing the stable educational foundation needed by students to succeed academically. More specifically, those researching the influence of academic advising have found the quality of an institution's advising to be related to such factors as the students' morale, grade point average, and retention rate. But, despite the preponderance of such evidence as to the importance of academic advising to student satisfaction and retention, this key function is frequently being found to be not well designed or effectively implemented by most institutions (King, 1993; Morehead & Johnson, 1964; Stickle, 1982; Trombley, 1984; Wilder, 1981).

Existing research seems to strongly suggest the importance of the academic advising factor, yet also reveals the problem of improper implementation of such programs. Hence, there seems to be a need for focusing additional attention on the academic advisement process. This trend is increasingly being seen in several sectors of higher education. For example, the University cf Maine, in an effort to enhance student retention, has implemented a voluntary comprehensive academic advisement program for their first year students (Gershman, Anchors, & Robbins, 1988). An importance part of their program includes an emphasis on basic skills assessment and the appropriate placement of students in entry-level courses. Officials at Maine are now finding that those first year students in the program are exhibiting noticeably higher levels of satisfaction with college, as well as an improved rate of retention and academic success when compared with previous freshman classes and with those first year students not in the program.

Similarly, changes in the form and delivery of academic advising are also starting to occur in historically Black colleges and universities. At one such institution, Alabama A & M University, it was found

that the freshman-to-sophomore attrition rate for the 1988 academic year was over 50% (Johnson, 1990). In response to this result, the university extensively modified its' Freshman Advising Program. The result of which was the development of a full service, stand-alone center dedicated to program implementation and performance monitoring. The new center corrected what was a loosely organized and inefficient program. Well received by both students and faculty, the program seems to be providing a positive influence on the rate of freshman academic success and retention. In general, such outcomes would seem to indicate that further investigation into the area of academic advisement is justifiable because of its' seemingly influencial effect on future academic performance and retention (Johnson, 1990; King, 1993).

Methodology

A convenience sample of freshman student records were collected from the student population at a predominantly Black public university in a southern city within the United States (N=110). The sample, all of whom are Black Americans, was stratified into two groups. The first group (A-group, n=62) consisted of those

students who were (1), required to and who had successfully completed basic skills entry-level coursework in reading and writing or (2), were not required to take basic reading or writing. The second group (B-group, n=48) consisted of students who were required to, but had not, successfully passed the basic skills/remedial entry-level courses in reading and writing or who had inappropriately bypassed the basic skills courses.

Utilizing secondary source data, derived from student records, for descriptive analysis, both groups (A and B), were examined as to their subsequent mean performance level in an entry-level history course. The course, according to a consensus of faculty from the departments of developmental studies and history, requires a 12th grade baseline level of reading, comprehension and writing commensurate with the mastering of material within the basic skills reading and writing courses. The T-test was performed to determine if any statistically significant difference between group means (A and B) existed.

Results

Demographically, the study sample consisted of the academic records of a population of 110 Black undergraduate students drawn from the class roles of several sections of an entry-level history course. The sample consisted of 38 males (34.5%) and 72 females (65.5%). Of the sample population (N=110), 62 (56.4%) were assigned to "Group-A" and 48 (43.6%) were assigned to "Group-B".

Summary group grade point averages from the history course were analyzed for each group (A and B) to reveal between-group differences. When calculating the mean class grade point average for each group (See Figure 1), a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) was revealed. Group-A (successful preparation group) had a mean grade point average of 2.64 on a 4.0 scale. The mean grade point average of Group-B (non-successful preparation group) was 1.18 on a 4.0 scale ($p < .05$).

----INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE----

Looking further, other significant differences between groups A and B seem evident. When looking at the

grade proportions for each group (See Figure 2), a negatively skewed distribution was found for Group-A with the following assignments: A's = 10%, B's = 56%, C's = 26%, D's = 5% and F's = 3%. On the other hand, Group-B's grade distribution was positively skewed with the following proportions: A's = 0%, B's = 10%, C's = 33%, D's = 26%, and F's = 31%.

----INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE----

Conclusions

When looking at the differences between groups A and B; namely, the mean class grade point averages and the grade distributions, there seems to be a significant element of support for proper prerequisite academic advisement. As mentioned previously, Group-A consisted of students who had (1), successfully completed required basic skills coursework in reading and/or writing or (2), were not required to take basic reading or writing skills courses. The second group (Group-B) consisted of students who were required to take basic skills courses in reading and writing but had not taken them or had not successfully passed them.

When the academic performance of Group-B and Group-A are compared (See Figures 1 & 2) it seems evident that those students who lacked academic success (Group-B) did not successfully complete appropriate prerequisite coursework. This would seem to indicate that poor academic performance could itself be the ultimate result of poor or ill-conceived advisement procedures (Hanson & Raney, 1993; Johnson, 1990; Lowenstein & Grites, 1993; Orbach, 1988).

Though data concerning the present rate of retention for each group was not tested for, the literature strongly suggests that low student morale and improper academic preparation are the precursors of poor classroom performance (King, 1993; Orbach, 1988). As such, it might be suggested that a strategy for improved advising and counseling might be called for. Such strategies, as suggested by the literature (Johnson, 1990; Nelson, Scott, & Bryan, 1984; Orbach, 1988), could include consistently enforced, well conceived guidlines of prerequisites in student coursework. In addition, specific information regarding courses and academic fields, being sure to make evident what skills and performance levels are necessary, could provide an

effective multifacited approach for successful experiences in higher educational institutions (Kapraun, 1992; King, 1993).

FIGURE 1

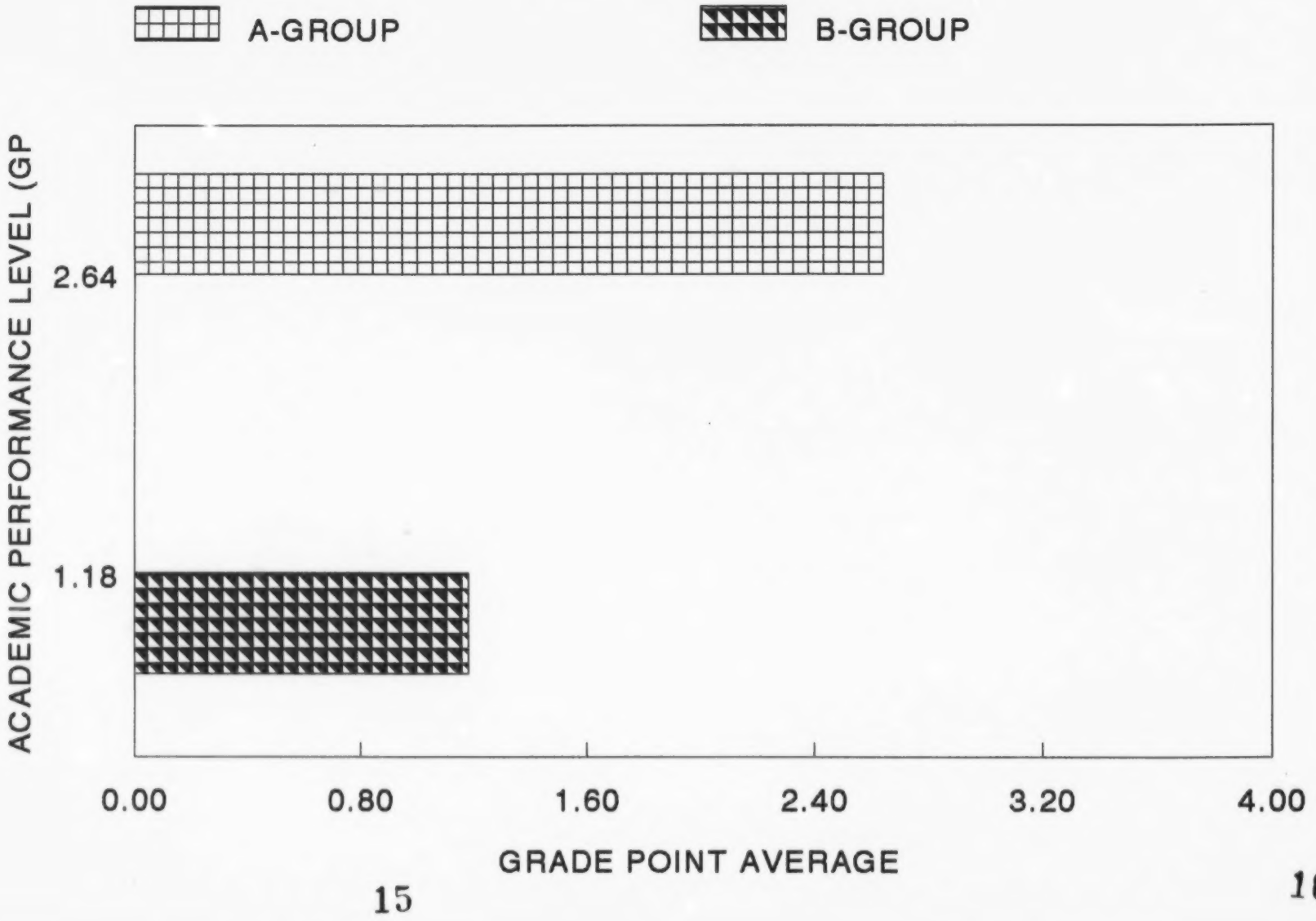
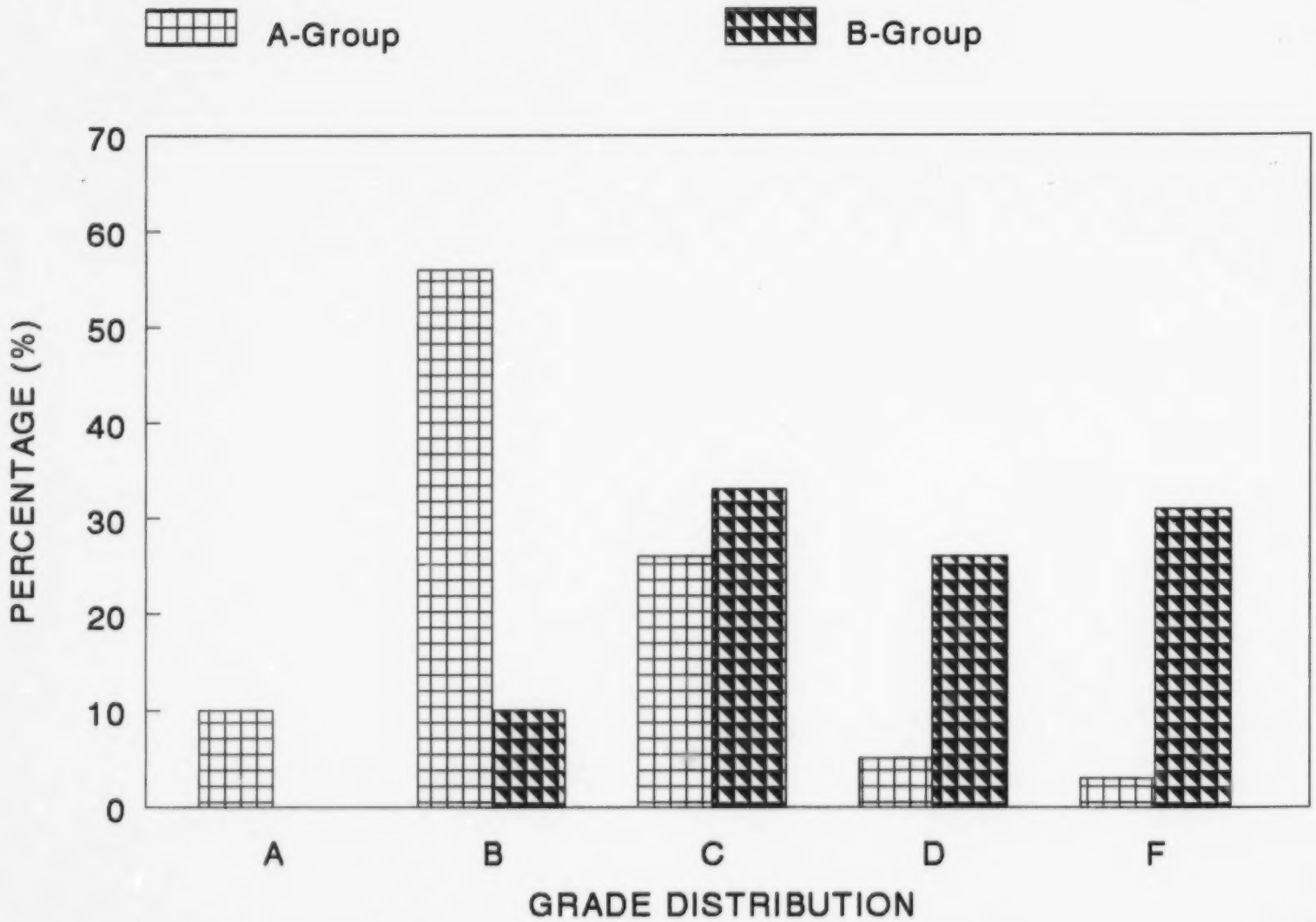

A-GROUP
B-GROUP
ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE LEVEL (GP
2.64
1.18
0.00
0.80
1.60
2.40
3.20
4.00
GRADE POINT AVERAGE

FIGURE 2


A-Group
B-Group
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
PERCENTAGE (%)
A
B
C
D
F
GRADE DISTRIBUTION

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